

The mood was mellow yet with a celebratory air. This year's version of Steny Hoyer's annual Flag Day bull roast and birthday party marked his 30th year in Congress—many of them in national leadership.

More than 2,000 community leaders, dignitaries, precinct workers, long-time friends and even some Hoyer classmates from Suitland High School jammed the Newton White Mansion in Largo on muggy June evening. Hoyer's dear friend, Ben Cardin, a U.S. senator with an impressive career of his own, was doing his best to work up crowd.

"We're celebrating our Steny, our friend, our congressman, who's made such a difference in the lives of so many people here in the Fifth District, in Maryland, and around the nation. Steny, on behalf of all those people that you've helped for all these years, we are so proud to be able to celebrate this milestone. But we want you to know there are many, many, many more years to come. Congratulations, Steny Hoyer."

"Thank you so much, Ben."

Hoyer's reply was both comic and cryptic:

"I didn't know I would survive this long."

Hoyer's comment might have reflected the perilous state of moderate, "blue dog" Democrats, who represent increasingly conservative rural areas, even in liberal states like Maryland. Hoyer is top hound of the "blue dogs" in the House, whose mass defeat at the polls last year cost him the job of House Majority Leader.

In fact, State Senate President Mike Miller said of the party crowd:

"I told somebody, if this many people had shown up on election day, Steny would have carried all five counties instead of just two."

On a far more personal level, though, Hoyer's comment revealed he was revisiting the dreams of two young ambitious guys who met in the sixties as congressional aides. He and Peter O'Malley put together Maryland's last real political organization—some say machine -- and were aiming Hoyer at the governor's mansion. He shared some memories during a recent interview in his still spacious Capitol office.

"Pete and I were both interested in politics and we were both almost exactly the same age. Pete was three months older than I. And our families, Jan and Judy, got to be friends. And so for the next really 16 to 18 years, O'Malley-Hoyer or Hoyer-O'Malley many people thought was one name because we did so much together. And of course, we got in politics, we organized and we were very successful, and we like to think we headed up a very good political organization."

The Hoyer-O'Malley machine scored great success with its 1974 Blue Ribbon slate. One notable victory was integrating the Prince George's County Senate delegation for the first time ever. Former State Senator Tommie Broadwater was savoring the milestone.

"Oh, yes, indeed. Steny's my man, Steny's my man. I was the first black senator outside the city of Baltimore in the state of Maryland.

I was a part of the team. We had a good team."

Yet, the vaulted machine failed in its chief goal: to put Hoyer in the governor's mansion in 1978. In the wake of the Marvin Mandel political corruption scandals, reformer Harry Hughes won instead. Hoyer and O'Malley withdrew into private life. O'Malley never returned.

In 1981, Hoyer's career was suddenly resurrected after Rep. Gladys Spellman slipped into a fatal coma after a heart attack. The House declared her seat vacant and called a special election. Hoyer bested a huge field in the race that followed, and shifted his sights to reaching top ranks of the more cutthroat world of Washington politics.

For House members hustling past reporters on their way into the chamber recently, the Anthony Weiner sex scandal and U.S. action in Libya posed the most immediate pitfalls.

But Hoyer fears the sharply polarized climate in Washington and throughout the nation has rendered Congress practically non-functional.

“Frankly, I think the Republican party is the most conservative that I’ve seen it in my, not just 30 years in Congress, but in my 42 years in public life.”

Democrats are hardly blameless, Hoyer agrees. He and Republican House Speaker John Boehner have a tradition of respect that makes life easier. But the “take-no-prisoners” attitude generally in fashion makes it very difficult for moderates, like Hoyer, who are willing to cross the aisle in search of compromise.

“I think too much of it is about who wins and who loses. I think opposition parties now tend to be focused on making the other side fail, as opposed to working constructively to make things happen. I think that’s unfortunate but not surprising.”

Add to Hoyer’s frustration, the loss of control after the Republicans took over this year and retirement at age 72 might seem an attractive option. Except, there’s so more much still to do.

Workers in a Beltsville factory are busy drilling holes in tubes to create sophisticated antenna that have peacetime as well as military applications. Trouble is, they can’t sell their product directly to the US government because they can’t get cut through the federal bureaucracy to get part numbers approved. Anu Wahai, executive director, of Antenna Research Associates, explained during a Hoyer tour.

“There’s no reason, it’s just very difficult as a small business to navigate that.”

This one of the main reasons Members of Congress were invented, and Hoyer raised the issue at the Pentagon the next day.

Personal stuff can mean far more than the boatloads of federal dollars Hoyer brings home to Maryland. His fondest memory is of a Romanian dissident, who thanked Hoyer for saving his life by interceding with the then Communist government.

Peter O'Malley's sudden death last month also put a sharp focus on what Hoyer is doing with this life. The two had dinner just a few weeks before and nothing seemed amiss.

"And so, when I got the news that he had died in his sleep, I was shocked and saddened."

Hoyer is optimistic about the Democrats reclaiming the House in 2012, but he has no plans to quit either way.

"Some days are diamonds, and as John Denver said, some days are stone. And some days are both. But when I stop enjoying it, when I stop feeling that I'm doing something positive and constructive and worthwhile, then I'll stop doing it."

And it's those folks who return every year to the Hoyer bull roast who give him that choice.

I'm Karen Hosler, reporting from Largo and Capitol Hill, for 88.1 WYPR.